

Judge Rejects Bush's Park Plan

Yellowstone Curbs Snowmobile Use

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Thursday, December 18, 2003; Page A33

LOS ANGELES, Dec. 17 -- A federal judge has blocked a Bush administration plan to expand the use of snowmobiles in Yellowstone National Park, giving a victory to environmental groups in what has been a long and contentious debate over motorized recreation at one of the country's natural wonders.

Ruling only hours before the park's winter season for visitors began, U.S. District Judge Emmet G. Sullivan said the move by Bush officials to overturn a Clinton administration plan that would have phased out snowmobiles at Yellowstone appeared to be "completely politically driven." He said it contradicted recent National Park Service conclusions on the issue.

The judge's decision, announced late Tuesday, created immediate turmoil at Yellowstone, which had been bracing for a new wave of snowmobile enthusiasts. Park Service officials expected to turn many riders away this week.

Under the Bush plan, nearly 1,000 snowmobiles would have been allowed into the park per day beginning Wednesday, an increase from past winters. But now park officials must limit the number this winter to less than 500 per day, and restrict their use to small, guided tours. Next winter, snowmobiles will be outlawed there. The same rules also apply to Grand Teton National Park, another hub for snowmobiling.

Opponents of the Bush plan praised the judge's decision, saying it would greatly reduce noise and air pollution at the famed Yellowstone Park and protect its wildlife.

"Our duty is to take care of our national parks as fully as possible so that we pass them in good health to our grandchildren," said Denis P. Galvin, the deputy director of the Park Service during the Clinton administration. "Had we let that principle slip in Yellowstone to benefit the snowmobile industry, it would have set a terrible precedent in all our national parks."

Advocates of the Bush plan vowed Wednesday to challenge the ruling. Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton said it would limit or deny many Americans access to Yellowstone's beauty.

Norton said that the Bush plan is a balanced response to the snowmobile debate because instead of banning visitors from using the popular vehicles, it would force them to use new models that are much cleaner and quieter. She said the rules created during the Clinton administration did not take into account new and environmentally friendly advances in snowmobile technology.

"The Park Service plan can be adapted to ensure that wildlife, park personnel, park resources and the public are protected," she said.

About 140,000 people visit Yellowstone every winter, and many of them come to ride snowmobiles. The vehicles, which can reach speeds of 60 mph, have been subject to few regulations at the park.

But their growing popularity over the past decade has created an emotional debate. It is partly a culture clash between visitors who contend that the park's splendor is being ruined by the constant rumble of the machines and others who call snowmobiles a thrilling form of recreation.

Under the Clinton plan that is being hastily revived, snowmobiles will be banned in Yellowstone and Grand Teton next winter, and visitors will be allowed to use only skis or snowshoes, or ride in mass-transit snow coaches there.

Three years ago, the Park Service supported that approach, concluding after a scientific analysis on air quality and wildlife that snowmobiles posed an assortment of risks for nature and people.

Sullivan noted that one study on the effect of snowmobiles in Yellowstone found that at times the park had carbon monoxide levels as high as in Los Angeles.

But Norton and other advocates of the Bush administration's plan said they feared that the judge's ruling could lead to many other restrictions against human activity in national parks.

"If environmental extremists continue to have their way," Rep. Richard W. Pombo (R-Calif.) said in a statement, "people will be looking at Yellowstone through a plate glass window."